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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the beginnings of a project to remake the oral communication general education course--part of the vision for the course is to use technology to help students learn course content. According to the paper, currently the basic course is taught mostly in traditional format (relatively small sections with set assignments), with some colleges and universities substituting for a course by having an all-campus communication lab with oral communication assignments within courses offered across the curriculum. The paper details how a faculty and graduate student working group investigated the state of interactive technologies and how they might apply to the course. It describes some instructional technologies used by different universities, including Virginia Tech and the University of Richmond. It also describes other developments in the project and concludes by suggesting a set of criteria for deciding whether and how to use learning by technology in developing knowledge and ability in oral communication. (Author/NKA)

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Criteria for Using Technology to Teach the Basic Course in Communication

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Criteria for Using Technology to Teach the Basic Course in Communication

(abstract)

This paper describes the beginnings of a project to remake the oral communication general education course. Part of the vision for the course is to use technology to help students learn course content. The paper details how a faculty and graduate student working group investigated the state of interactive technologies and how they might apply to the course. It also describes other developments in the project and concludes by suggesting a set of criteria for deciding whether and how to use learning by technology in developing knowledge and ability in oral communication.

Criteria for Using Technology to Teach the Basic Course in Communication

The basic course in oral communication skill development is the most ubiquitous course in the communication discipline. Most U.S. colleges and universities offer some form of this course, even if they do not offer a major in communication. The course is taught mostly in traditional format (relatively small sections, with set assignments for all students) often by graduate teaching assistants or part-time instructors. In some cases, colleges and universities substitute for a course by using an all-campus communication lab with oral communication assignments within courses offered across the curriculum.

Like well-established basic courses in other disciplines, the oral communication course has a set of traditions surrounding its curriculum and instruction. A few textbooks predominate in multiple editions (e.g., the classic public speaking text, first authored by Alan Monroe and Douglas Ehninger, is now in its 15th edition), and much of the competition attempts to improve presentation, rather than content. Some communication faculty have spoken with pride about how "Artistotle said it best, and we really can't improve on him (even though we try)."

There are two seemingly good reasons for such slavish adherence to tradition. First, a set of well-known traditions allows for mounting a readily understandable curriculum should the course come under attack. Second, the course is often taught by inexperienced instructors who receive minimal training. Having straightforward content and clear traditions allows new instructors to understand without difficulty what needs to be taught (even if there remains little guidance as to *how* it should be taught).

While traditions have their benefits, they also foster a resistance to change. It is easy to assume that because a course was once effective it will continue to be effective. It is also easy to assume that a set of assignments is having the desired impact on students, because at least some students respond favorably toward them.

So, change is hard, especially in the basic oral communication course. Yet, change is essential to keep any course vibrant and vital.

The development and spread of interactive communication technologies has provided an opportunity for change in the basic course. Some of the changes possible with interactive technology allow for students to learn at their own pace, and in their own time, while others potentially allow for different modes of instruction. The authors of this paper constitute a working group on the general education oral communication course at San Diego State University (SDSU). The group was formed as the result of a commitment by the SDSU administration to offer a sufficient number of sections of the oral communication general education course to insure all first-year students would take the course early in their university careers. Prior to that time, students took the course whenever they could schedule it, and consequently, course sections contained students from all class levels. In concept, classes would now be restricted to first-year students, and so we needed to insure the course design met those students' needs. Our goal for examining curriculum and instruction in the course was, therefore, to insure students were receiving the most effective possible education in oral communication knowledge and abilities. The working group initially consisted of tenured faculty, but graduate teaching associates and part-time faculty who taught the course were soon added as enthusiastic participants.

The remainder of this paper describes the intellectual journey of the working group to date. As will become clear, the group began early to consider the possibilities for completely re-working how the course was taught, and interactive technology became a part of the group's discussions early on. In telling the story of the group's development, we will suggest criteria we developed for considering the use of interactive technology in the oral communication course, but we will focus on how we responded to our overriding goal of creating the best possible course for our first-year students.

Why Change?

Development of oral communication abilities has always been a double-edged sword. On one hand, it is clear that the general public does not always perceive itself as being good at difficult communication situations. For example, a national opinion poll conducted by Roper Starch for NCA found that, while 62% of respondents said they were "very comfortable" with communication, generally, only a third said they were very comfortable with communicating in groups and 21% could claim they were very comfortable with public speaking. Education, however, made a difference in these responses, with more educated respondents indicating they felt more comfortable in these situations (Eadie, in press).

On the other hand, some academics have proven suspicious of oral communication courses, deriding them as "easy A's" and as teaching common sense material that students should already know. At least once a year, some U.S. institution's oral communication course comes under attack by faculty or administrative review committees.

To protect ourselves against attack, the discipline has tended to focus on teaching public speaking, an activity associated with educated people, and a highly contextual skill

relatively few people receive either formal or informal experience or instruction in through their ordinary educational and career trajectories. By emphasizing public speaking, however, the discipline may be denying itself an opportunity to teach students more about how to analyze the subtleties of creating messages for specific audiences, to examine how visual and environmental elements contribute to message comprehension and effectiveness, and to work through a variety of problematic communication situations (such as accounting for difference, interpreting and dealing with emotions, negotiating differences of opinion, and learning to be an active participant in both personal and mediated communication). In most cases, the typical student will take only one course in communication, and therefore that course should be more representative of the field than it is currently.

Yet, our current instructional practices make change very difficult. In order to provide as much practice as possible, we keep sections small (and continually battle with administrations that want to raise class limits). To insure we can maintain class sizes within the bounds of sound pedagogical practice for a competency-based course, we spend as much time as possible on practicing various forms of communication. Much of the students' class time, however, is spent observing others, rather than working on their own improvement. And, students work through common assignments, as if one size will fit all. In fact, we know that some students may excel at public speaking but have problems with using communication to build relationships, while other students may have their most difficult time working with a group. Students learn generic presentation skills, but they may not be able to apply them to more specific situations, such as making an acceptable academic presentation in their fields of study. We are so pushed for time in the

course that we have trouble incorporating instruction in the effective use of technology within presentations.

So, we would like to present more content but also devote more time to individual skill development. Given the constraints of 40-45 hours of class time in a term, we will need a different instructional approach if we want to do more. Time is the thing we need most, if we want to improve the basic oral communication course.

Our working group began from the premise that we wanted to try something different. We started with a vision that was much different than our current practice: in this vision, students would be assessed for several communication abilities and would have learning plans designed to improve the abilities they needed to work on most. We would move the class out of the classroom altogether and into a laboratory setting where the instructors would be available primarily as coaches to help students complete the learning plan and then to provide assessments for the individual assignments. In this model, content could be presented "live," via scheduled lectures, "taped," via video-on-demand, or "interactive," via web-based technologies, and student performance could seamlessly incorporate learning and presentation of PowerPoint type formats.

Clearly, this vision represents a radical departure from current practice, and we were not in a position, either intellectually or in terms of resources, to move toward it quickly. We did decide, however, to proceed step by step, with the idea that current practice was perfectly acceptable and we could always return to it if we were not satisfied with any of our experiments.

The Odyssey

Once we had begun to consider other options, we decided that we needed to see what other programs might have already accomplished. Several of us had conversations with faculty from other institutions at the NCA meeting in Atlanta, in an attempt to find some innovations and some potential partners with whom to work. We found two places in Virginia where interesting work was going on: Virginia Tech, in Blacksburg, and the University of Richmond. As Patricia Geist Martin and Bill Eadie were traveling to Washington, DC, on other business at approximately the same time, the two of them set off to explore these possibilities.

Virginia Tech

The first stop was Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech), in Blacksburg. Virginia Tech is known to be a leader in implementing instructional technology. It was the first university to collect doctoral dissertations in electronic form, and it has pioneered the development of a number of electronic instructional innovations.

The facility in which we were interested was the Math Emporium (online at http://www.emporium.vt.edu). This facility was created in what was formerly a "big box" store in a shopping center near the edge of campus. It is, essentially, a large computer laboratory, housing about 500 computer workstations. It was built out of necessity: in the early 1990s all of the state universities in Virginia were mandated to accommodate more students with fewer state dollars to support the additional enrollments. Mathematics was particularly hard hit by these requirements, as it provided several lower division service courses to most students. Approximately 3500 students enrolled in its entry-level course, College Algebra and Trigonometry, alone. Teaching the course in small sections at a

university located in a rural part of the state strained resources needed for other mathematics courses. In response, the department persuaded the university to invest in a large facility, and it developed an online, self-paced, approach to teaching the course. The Math Emporium was, originally at least, conceived as the site where students would work their way through the lessons, supported by a staff of faculty, graduate teaching assistants, and undergraduate peer mentors. Students are also encouraged to meet and work with other students enrolled in the course.

The results of these efforts were dramatic. Not only was the math department able to meet the student demand for the course at a lower cost, but students enrolled in the online version of the course significantly outpaced students enrolled in traditional sections, in terms of learning, as measured by standardized tests.

The fact that the facility is present also allows more mixed models of instruction to emerge. Several other lower division math courses are taught in face-to-face sections, but have been modified to include a lab component where students work through problem sets at the Math Emporium. Because the facility has security procedures (e.g., students must show their picture ID cards and swipe the card as they enter the turnstiles), other classes (such as a basic Entomology class, which also relies heavily on instructional technology such as "The Cave," a virtual reality theatre where images can be manipulated by users) use the Emporium as a site for proctored exams.

Our visit occurred between terms, so the Math Emporium was nearly empty. We did see some of the materials that were used for the self-paced course, and we chatted with a couple of the staff members. From these interactions we learned the mixed mode of some face-to-face class time combined with having the Math Emporium as a lab space

where students could get help if they needed it was the most popular mode of instruction for mathematics faculty members. In fact, it was implied that there had been resistance to putting classes other than the first course into the self-paced format (the first course was characterized as "pre-college" math, even though the catalog does not list it as a remedial course). From the student point of view, trekking to the Math Emporium was seen as a burden, so most of the course material was put online and made accessible to students from wherever they wanted to log on. For security purposes, however, any work that counted in the final grade (quizzes, exams) had to be completed at the Math Emporium.

From this visit, we drew several conclusions:

- It is possible to create course materials that can teach abstract concepts successfully while still accommodating differing learning styles (i.e., flexibility for learning styles).
- Students are most likely to use a technological resource if it is available and convenient to them when they are ready to use it (i.e., convenience and access, both spatially and chronemically).
- Secure testing facilities are needed to allow for accurate assessment of student learning (i.e., data integrity and security).
- The ability to interact face-to-face with others about the material and to get help as needed is a key component to success of online learning with beginning college students (i.e., access to personalized feedback).
- Faculty members prefer a mixed model, with some classroom interaction and some exercises to be completed online or at a laboratory facility where help is available (i.e., mixed-mode delivery).

- Student learning via interactive technology may be superior to student learning via traditional classroom means (i.e., demonstrable instructional gains).

Richmond

Geist Martin and Eadie proceeded to Richmond, which is located on the other side of the state of Virginia from Blacksburg. Arriving in the afternoon, they met with Linda Hobgood, at the speech center that she directs (online at http://oncampus.richmond.edu/academics/support/speech), and the meeting continued on into dinner.

The purpose for this meeting was to look at Hobgood's facility and to understand her methods of coaching students in improving their communication abilities. The University of Richmond is a small, selective, liberal arts college located in an upscale neighborhood west of downtown. The university has a department known as rhetoric and communication studies, which offers a major but does not teach a university-wide requirement in oral communication.

The Speech Center is located in three small rooms on the first floor of the building where Rhetoric and Communication Studies is housed. One of the rooms is Hobgood's office, and the other two rooms are set up as practice and research areas. All three rooms have video cameras mounted on the wall, and these cameras can be used to tape performances.

The idea of the Speech Center grew out of an awareness on the part of administrators that University of Richmond students were not performing adequately in their oral communication abilities. It was also motivated by policy articulated by the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, which mandates that all institutions of higher

education in the state will be able to demonstrate that their students have been educated in "core competencies," among them oral communication.

The Speech Center is the integral piece in an oral communication across-the-curriculum model. Courses across the range of academic programs at Richmond are designated as "oral communication intensive." Instructors in those courses create discipline-specific oral communication assignments. As part of the assignment, instructors may require that their students visit the Speech Center for assistance and practice. The Speech Center is university-wide and encourages students to come and work on whatever assignments they wish. The Center also encourages faculty and administrators to get coaching as well.

The Center is staffed by a group of student consultants. The consultants must have taken the basic course in Rhetoric and Communication Studies, though they need not be majors in that program. They also take a semester-long course that teaches them how to coach the development of oral communication ability. Once they have qualified as consultants, they are paid for the number of hours they work at the Center. Senior consultants are also assigned to work directly with faculty, in structuring and grading assignments. Richmond is a residential campus surrounded by private homes, so student life is focused on campus. The consultant positions provide both an on-campus job and status, so they tend to attract bright, highly motivated students. The key use of technology in the process seems to be videotaping practice sessions, though some coaching in the use of presentation software, such as PowerPoint, is also available. Keys to the success of the program seem to be that the speaking assignments are discipline-specific and therefore

more relevant to students, that faculty supports the program, and that student word-of-mouth about the Speech Center is positive.

From this visit, we might conclude:

- Once students are familiar with the benefits of technology they develop positive attitudes toward using it (i.e., user acceptance follows familiarity and adoption).
- Peer coaches can be trained successfully to assist students with developing their oral communication abilities, including the use of technology in learning about oral communication (i.e., value-added peer coaching).
- The development of a successful peer-coaching program is facilitated by substantive recognition, including pay and status on campus as reliable experts in oral communication (i.e., importance of compensation and "professionalization" of coaching positions).
- Peer coaches often use their experiences to integrate theory and research learned in other communication courses (i.e., coaching as a "capstone" experience for communication students).

The Experimental Sections

Following the Richmond visit, Geist Martin and Eadie met with NCA Associate Director Sherwyn Morreale, at the NCA offices in Washington, DC. Morreale was most generous with her time and was most encouraging to the idea of re-developing the basic course. During these discussions, the three decided some experimentation could be implemented during that upcoming term. They contacted Brian Spitzberg by phone, and Spitzberg quickly recruited SDSU graduate teaching associates Catherine Armas-Matsumoto, Chuck Goehring, and Laura Knight to devise a syllabus that incorporated a

wider range of skill development, a set of laboratory experiences, and a greater degree of assessment into the course. As this experiment did not include any increase in the use of technology, we will discuss it only briefly.

The three graduate teaching associates who worked on developing the syllabus for the alternate course each taught that syllabus to two sections of the course. A total of six sections were taught with the new syllabus, while 84 sections were taught on the traditional model. The traditional model followed closely to the form of a standard public speaking course. Some, but by no means all, instructors of the course introduced presentation technologies, such as PowerPoint. Some instructors used a variety of media in teaching the course. Often, use of technology in the traditional model was hindered by the fact that the course is taught in a variety of locations around campus, usually in classrooms where instructional media were not installed. The only "lab" component for the course is a room where trained undergraduates are available at certain hours to help with speech preparation and practice.

The effectiveness of the sections was assessed in two different ways. Bryan Lubic, under the supervision of Brian Spitzberg, administered a group of instruments selected because of their relationship to both the traditional and the experimental curricula. Lubic administered these assessments at the beginning and the end of the course to all of the experimental sections and a matched group of traditional sections. In addition, Jeffrey Good and Evan Block conducted an ethnographic analysis of the experimental sections, under the supervision of Patricia Geist Martin.

Lubic's data did not indicate any differences between the experimental and the traditional sections, in terms of student scores on the instruments. There were differences,

however, for all sections studied between pre- and post- administrations of the instruments, primarily on the Conversational Skills Rating Form (Spitzberg, 1995; Spitzberg & Hurt, 1987). This instrument measures four clusters of perceived interaction skills: attentiveness (i.e., attention to, interest in, and concern for the other interactants), composure (i.e., confidence, assertiveness, self-control), coordination (i.e., interaction management) and expressiveness (i.e., verbal and nonverbal animation and vivacity). There were also some differences on individual items of other instruments that measured the ability to adapt one's message to different audiences.

Good and Block's analysis indicated that the term "experimental" may have been a significant factor in generating a lack of difference between the two groups of sections. The students in the experimental sections were told at the beginning of the term that they were part of a trial to determine whether a different approach to the course was warranted. Many of these students had friends enrolled in the traditional sections of the course, and they perceived (probably incorrectly) that they were being asked to do significantly more work than their peers. Substantial resentment set in early on, and the instructors of the experimental sections reported their classes were "difficult." These instructors started to worry about their course evaluations and how evaluators might read those evaluations in the future. Fortunately, Susan Hellweg, the course director, had been very supportive of the project, had made room for it, administratively, and was able to reassure the instructors their future employment was not in jeopardy. The experimental sections never recovered from their feelings of being forced to work harder than their peers, however, and while the experimental section students learned in equivalent ways to their peers, they were less happy about their learning.

The experiment did give the working group enough positive data to satisfy it that the course should be modified. A second group of sections was set up for the fall semester of 2002, to give the new program a trial run. These sections were called "progressive," instead of "experimental," and indications are they are being received far more favorably than their predecessors. The progressive curriculum will be implemented in all sections for the spring semester of 2003.

A Chat With the Educational Technologists

The focus of our project had moved away from the implementation of interactive technology as a method of teaching content. So, Bill Eadie decided to meet with Professor Allison Rossett, a professor of educational technology at San Diego State University (online at http://edweb.sdsu.edu/EdWeb_Folder/People/Arossett/Arossett.html), and James Frazee, Associate Director of the SDSU Instructional Technology Services office (online at http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/dept/its/aboutus/ staff.html), and one of Allison's doctoral students.

The meeting was a good one from a number of standpoints. Allison and James asked pointed questions, particularly about the course goals, from both the perspective of cognitive and affective learning and the perspective of skill development. They pointed out that good interactive technology not only presented the information necessary for cognitive learning, but it should also support the skill development portion of the class. They ran through some examples of how certain sample lessons could be taught. All in all, they were very helpful in brainstorming possibilities, and they indicated they believed

that (1) the project could be undertaken and done well, and (2) outside funding might well be available for a project such as this one.

This conversation stirred Eadie to seek out criteria that educational technologists use for judging the effectiveness of multimedia learning projects. He found a list of those criteria on a "best practices" site for the University of Texas system (online at http://uts.cc.utexas.edu/~best/index.htm):

- Content design
- Instructional design
- Screen design
- Integration of media
- Ease of use
- Interactivity
- Innovation
- Evaluation of learning
- Educational value

From this meeting, Eadie was able to draw the following conclusions:

- Interactive technology works best for learning when the desired outcomes are clearly defined (i.e., program goal clarity).
- Clear outcome definitions imply that the means of assessment and what counts as "significant improvement" need to be specified in careful terms (i.e., assessment precision and validity).
- The design of interactive media depends on how much learner engagement is needed and how sophisticated the learners are in terms of adapting to online

interactivity and having the proper equipment to access the lessons in a manner appropriate to their design (importance of learner adaptability).

The Criteria

This project aimed at defining some criteria for the effective use of interactive technology for instruction in the general education oral communication course. We have described the process by which we are attempting to redesign this course in a manner that allows teaches content adequately, provides opportunities to develop and practice skills, and reserves more time for instructor-student coaching sessions. The criteria we developed may not be exhaustive, but they should provide an aid to others who may be considering technological adaptations within basic oral communication courses:

- Interactive technology should be viewed as a portion of a general education oral communication, and not the course itself. Human contact should always been provided in some form for this course.
- Course goals for learning via interactive technology should be clearly specified.
- Assessments should focus on measurable student achievement. A minimum level of acceptable student achievement should be defined.
- While students can check their progress as they work through the software, a system for taking secure examinations on course content needs to be developed.
- Students using interactive technology for learning course content need to be capable of learning how to use the software and need to be using it on hardware that allows the programs to work properly. Some sort of technical help should be available to students when content is presented through interactive technology.

- Students should be encouraged to form groups (electronically or face-to-face) to discuss and assist each other in learning the material.
- Peer coaches can be used effectively to assist students in learning content and in practicing skill development.
- To the extent that the application of the lessons can be tailored to students interests (perhaps through discipline-appropriate assignments), student motivation to work through the lessons should be enhanced.
- The design and execution of the software should conform to the best practices available. The software should be updated often enough to ensure that best practices continue to be followed.
- The design and execution of the software should allow students with different learning styles to use it effectively.
- Interactive technology should not necessarily replace traditional textbooks. Instead, interactive technology may be used in conjunction with printed books to provide an optimal learning experience for students.
- The use of interactive technology should be adapted to the needs of individual campuses.
- Technology should be considered as ancillary to, rather than replacing, learning from trained instructors.

Foretelling the Future

Our vision for a new general education oral communication course is one where students have their communication abilities assessed, have individualized programs of study designed for them, work with faculty and peer coaches, as well as one or more

cohort groups to complete their assignments, learn course content through a variety of mediated and non-mediated means, and are assessed to insure that the completed assignments adequately improved their oral communication abilities. So far, we have moved away from a curriculum totally focused on public speaking toward one that incorporates relational and group communication. We have investigated the other innovations that would be necessary to achieve this vision, but we have not gotten very far on planning to implement them. Clearly, this project is a long-term one, but we believe that it is one that has great potential for both our own program and for the communication discipline. Where will we be in a year or five years? No one can be certain, but we will surely be in a different place than where we are today.

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